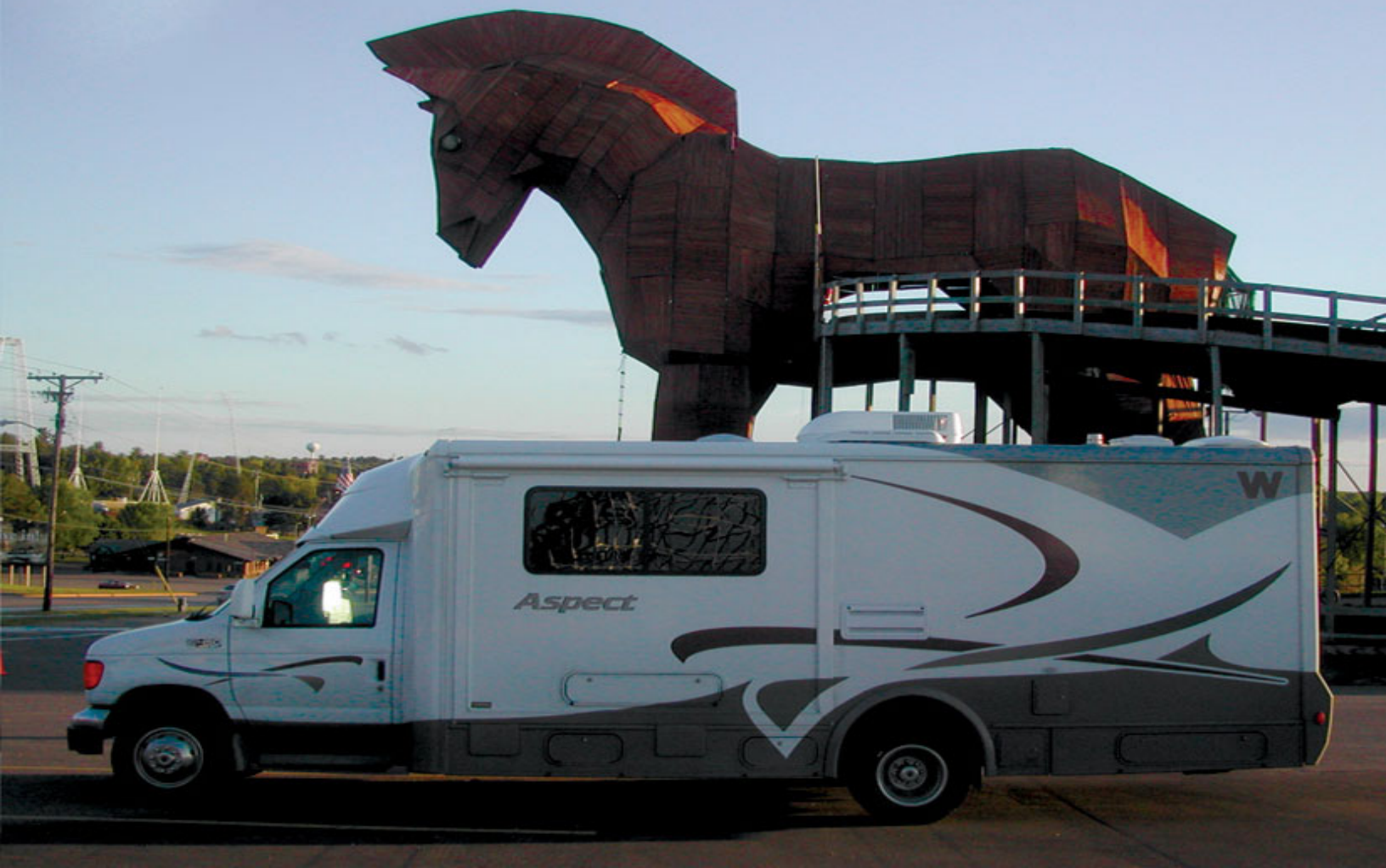
turn left at the trojan horse

A WOULD-BE HERO'S AMERICAN ODYSSEY

brad herzog

"A truly epic journey." —A. J. Jacobs, author of *The Year of Living Biblically*



praise for
turn left at the trojan horse

"Thank you Brad Herzog for taking me on a great cross-country journey. To quote another storyteller, his words winged like arrows to the mark."

—**AJ Jacobs**, author of *The Guinea Pig Diaries* and *The Year of Living Biblically*

"*Turn Left at the Trojan Horse* had me howling with laughter and nodding pensively at the razor-sharp observation. His epic road trip, tinged with local culture and flavored with the Greek myths, is the stuff of legend itself and puts Herzog at the forefront of the genre."

—**Tabir Shah**, author of *The Caliph's House* and *In Search of King Solomon's Mines*

"Brad Herzog is the perfect travel companion: funny, wise, and as good a storyteller as you'll find on the open road. You can't help but want to spend a month in his passenger seat after reading this book."

—**Chad Millman**, author of *The Detonators* and *The Odds*

"A midlife quest that while grounded in mythology, transports the reader along a redemptive, poetic journey through small-town America."

—**Doreen Orion**, author of *Queen of the Road*

"Herzog cleverly reinvents the original 'road trip' in his new book, one that is more than just a timeless journey of self-discovery. He is at his best when taking the reader to little-known towns born of Homer's itinerary and introducing us to the endearing people who make these places so uniquely American. As we sit in Herzog's passenger seat, we cannot help but stare out the window and even see our own reflection in the glass.

—**Liz Robbins**, author of *A Race Like No Other*

"Herzog is that rare person blessed with an innovative spirit and creative mind, persistence in pinpointing the heart of the issue…and skill in applying his reflections to paper."

—***Houston Chronicle***

Also by Brad Herzog

States of Mind
Small World

turn left at the trojan horse

A WOULD-BE HERO'S AMERICAN ODYSSEY

brad herzog

Citadel Press
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To Mom and Dad

There is in every constitution a certain solstice when the stars stand still in our inward firmament, and when there is required some foreign force, some diversion or alternative to prevent stagnation. And, as a medical remedy, travel seems one of the best.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Tell me, O muse, of that ingenious hero who traveled far and wide…

—Homer, the *Odyssey*

turn left at the trojan horse

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I

high noon

Mount Olympus has vanished, so I order another beer.

Around me, the patrons in this lofty bubble stab at pan-seared mahi mahi and sip chardonnays as the restaurant rotates, revealing the wonders of Puget Sound in a slow-motion panorama. One floor up, tourists ooh and aah their way around the Space Needle's observation deck. Some five hundred feet below, the Emerald City continues with its daily bustle.

A silent procession hums along Interstate 5. Hulking vessels inch across the sound. A seaplane lands and glides to a stop on Lake Union. A cruise ship—the *Sapphire Princess*—sits patiently dockside in Elliott Bay. To the east is the Seattle skyline backed by distant vistas of the Cascades. To the west is the Olympic Peninsula, where Mount Olympus rises regally from its center. But the sky is brimming with low stratus clouds, like ceiling tiles, and the mountain is hidden.

So this is where it begins—with my view obscured, but with the world revolving around me, one degree of perspective at a time.

I reach into my backpack, thumbing past tattered translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and a few back issues of *Sports Illustrated* until I find an envelope containing a breathless invitation: "Calling all classmates around the world to join us in Ithaca!"

This is what brought me here. I have been invited—along with three thousand or so Cornell University classmates—to a fifteenth reunion at the gleaming school on the hill in Ithaca, New York. *Come enjoy the guest lecturers and the glee club concert! Hear the president's State of the University address! Take in an alumni baseball game!* It might have added: *Consider the stratospheric success of your classmates, and wallow in a sense of under-achievement!*

When asked to revisit where you have been, you tend to assess where you are. You realize that the gradual march of days has accumulated into years and that the years are forming decades. When midlife approaches like a mugger in an alleyway, you don't merely take stock of your life; you

recall your original goals—and perhaps you notice the gulf between the former and the latter.

I seem to arrive at such an existential crisis every decade or so. I assume we all do, in one way or another. My first one happened when I was thirteen and about to celebrate my bar mitzvah, the Jewish rite of passage that was supposed to mean I was entering into some form of adulthood. I felt the weight of the world on my still-narrow shoulders, mostly because the world seemed suddenly complex and chaotic. I was overwhelmed by the onslaught of junior high school—the Darwinian game of social standing, the increasing imbalance of work and play, the shock of adolescence.

I recall the pressure of trying to memorize Hebrew text that—to my blurry and unconvinced eyes—looked like hieroglyphs and squiggles. I heard somewhere that girls preferred boys with dimples, so for my seventh-grade class photo I tried to surreptitiously suck in my cheeks while smiling. When the yearbook came out, I looked creepy and constipated. I remember silently sitting on my girlfriend's basement couch with my arm draped around her shoulder for what seemed like hours as I tried to summon the courage to make any sort of move. I thought: If I am becoming a man, this is a hell of an unimpressive start.

So I confronted this crisis of confidence by traveling inward, by delving further into my imagination. I escaped the chaos by creating worlds in which I was in command. I became a writer.

A few years later, in high school, I met Amy—as a result of my writing, in fact. An English teacher had decided to read one of my papers to her class. I stopped in to chat for a moment. Amy says she liked my smile. I think she was smitten by my metaphors. We attended a couple of proms together, weathered college in Ithaca, and saved our pennies to pay for a walk-up apartment on a leafy street in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. Following the thrill of our wedding day, we found ourselves falling into a routine and a future laid out before us like a straight track to the horizon. True adulthood had arrived, and responsibilities along with it. But we yearned for options. We wanted to sample life's possibilities before settling down. So this time I responded by traveling outward. We collected our meager savings, bought a thirty-four-foot RV, and hit the highway.

Through forty-eight states and nearly eleven months, we allowed our thoughts to expand and fill the open spaces, crystallizing our criteria of what we wanted out of a place to live. In the end, we opted for small-town

serenity on California's central coast, a place where John Steinbeck, Doc Ricketts, and Joseph Campbell used to clink beers, stare into tide pools, and ponder the human condition. I was self-satisfied at my ability to control my destiny and certain that the sky was the limit as long as I didn't settle for anything less than the ideal. But that was when I was a young phenom, newly married, already published at age twenty-six, still clinging to the idea that I could somehow change the world, one word at a time. That was before I had kids and a minivan and an unfathomable mortgage and the notion that my achievements were not meeting my expectations.

Before I found myself humbled by the vagaries of my profession, I would joke to friends that my sole objective was to someday gain entry into the encyclopedia. I figured the folks who make it into those glossy pages had been rewarded for being universally impressive or constructive or, at the very least, memorable. They discovered chemical elements or trekked into lands unknown or churned out literary classics. They earned their immortality. So I aspired to join them. Was that too much to ask?

Be careful what you wish for.

Several years ago, at the peak of the *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* phenomenon, I tried out for the show. By that I mean I phoned the 1-800 number they flashed on the screen and attempted to answer three trivia questions. I did it once a day for a couple of weeks. Why not? I am self-employed. There are worse ways to take a work break. It was a diversion, a lark—until I passed the initial round and received a fortunate random phone call telling me I had moved on to the next tryout hurdle.

So in rapid succession I answered five more questions, tougher ones, on subjects ranging from Mary Lou Retton to the Teapot Dome scandal. Finally, there was this synapse-snapper: "Put the following ancient civilizations in the order in which they were established—Assyrian, Mayan, Sumerian, Classical Greek." Wise Athena must have been smiling down on me. More likely, it was Tyche, goddess of luck. Soon enough, I found myself in Manhattan, along with nine other contestants, hoping for an opportunity to sit across from diminutive Regis Philbin and his shiny teeth, each of us craving a chance to conquer trivia questions for gobs of money in front of an audience of millions.

Then I won the “fastest-finger” round—by thirteen-hundredths of a second. This meant I was headed for something called the “hot seat,” which at the time was the epicenter of pop culture in America, a piece of furniture as iconic as Archie Bunker’s chair. Surreal doesn’t even begin to describe it, and because I tend to be rather cynical and inhibited, it was as out of character as if I had joined the cast of *A Chorus Line*.

For the next forty minutes, I did my best not to humiliate myself in front of twenty-five million people. I am sure I didn’t impress the ten million or so folks who were screaming at the boob on the tube who wasn’t quite sure about the name of Dilbert’s pet dog or the logo of Hallmark cards. But, using my lifelines early and often, I clawed my way through the murk of ignorance until suddenly this little television host was showing me a fake check for $64,000.

Then came a question for $125,000: Which of these American westerns was not a remake of a Japanese film? Possible answers: *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Outrage*, *High Noon*, *A Fistful of Dollars*.

I knew that the first one was a remake of *The Seven Samurai*. I had no clue about the rest. If I wanted to hazard a guess, I had a one-in-three chance. However, if I guessed incorrectly, I would lose half my money. I kept focusing on *High Noon*, mumbling it over and over, whispering my suspicion that it was the answer.

Before jetting off to New York I had considered possible scenarios with my friends, and I actually had declared that if I were in that exact situation—with an inkling of an idea at that particular level of the game—I would go for it. You only live once, I announced. The name of the show isn’t *Who Wants to Be Slightly Better Off*.

But when the real moment arrived, I hemmed and hawed and squirmed. Then, rather suddenly, I decided to stop. I took the money and walked away.

The next question would have been for a quarter of a million dollars. I would give anything to know what the subject would have been. In my daydreams, it is a bit of trivia about baseball or U.S. geography, something very much in my cerebral wheelhouse. All I had to do was answer three more questions correctly, and I would have been an instant millionaire.

The answer, of course, was *High Noon*. The irony—that I didn’t have the guts to choose a film about one man’s gallantry in the face of long odds—is not lost on me. While I was overjoyed at my windfall, I reflect on that moment of decision and feel pangs of weakness. I know that it took a

certain daring to get there in the first place. And I very much believe that we make our own breaks in life. But that decision nags at me. How many people are handed such a black-and-white litmus test of their nerve? Isn't boldness the one trait shared by most every encyclopedia-worthy historical figure? Did my fears win the day?

It was my Scylla-and-Charybdis moment. In Homer's mythological epics, this is brave Odysseus's most heart-wrenching dilemma, as he pilots his ships through what may have been the Straits of Messina, off the coast of Sicily. On one side is Charybdis, an unpredictable whirlpool that may—or may not—swallow entire ships. On the other side, in a gloomy cliffside cave, dwells Scylla, a monster with "twelve flapping feet, and six necks enormously long, and at the end of each neck a horrible head with three rows of teeth set thick and close, full of black death." She is guaranteed to snatch a half-dozen crew members in her deadly jaws. So this is Odysseus's choice—if he steers clear of one, he falls prey to the other. It is the genesis of the rock-and-hard-place metaphor. Do you risk everything for success, or do you sacrifice for safety?

Like Odysseus, I chose conservatively—security over audacity. And I regret it, both fiscally and spiritually. But that isn't the end of the story.

After every commercial break, Regis would ask contestants a personal question or two, his note cards stocked with information gleaned from a producer's pre-interview. We chatted about how I met Amy and what magazines I write for. We discussed the one-in-a-billion coincidence that the person in the hot seat right before me was a good friend of mine whose husband I have known since the age of nine. We even touched on the fact that I suffer from cremnophobia, the fear of precipices (which—let's face it—is really the fear of death). Finally, after I had won the $64,000, Regis said, "So you've written a few books. What's the latest one?"

So for about thirty seconds I described a book I had written, an account of my life-altering year on the road with my wife. *States of Mind* had been published to little fanfare by a small press in North Carolina. It had been sporadically, if kindly, reviewed, and only a few thousand copies had been sold. Before my moment of *Millionaire* glory aired, I had logged on to Amazon.com and discovered that it was the online bookseller's 122,040th best-selling book. That's humbling. But there were twenty-five million people watching—and paying attention. Within twenty-four hours, *States of Mind* was ranked No. 7.

USA Today ran a blurb revealing the book's meteoric rise. *Entertainment Weekly* called, followed by a parade of newspapers and national magazines. After I flew back to New York and chatted with Matt Lauer on NBC's *Today* show for five minutes, *States of Mind* rose to No. 2, behind only an unpublished Harry Potter novel.

Damn wizard.

By the time *People* magazine and the *Oprah* show contacted me, my excitement had evolved into bemused fascination. It was thrilling, of course, but I also struggled with ambivalence. My book chronicled a search for virtue in America—a literal and figurative trip through places like Inspiration (Arizona), Honor (Michigan), and Wisdom (Montana)—yet I had promoted it on a mind-numbing television show predicated on greed. It was a bit like Harper Lee using *Let's Make a Deal* as a platform, if you will pardon the comparison. And while the ensuing publicity was a hoot, it focused almost entirely on the book's sales, not necessarily the merits of the book itself. I feared that I had sold out and peaked at the same time. Other than quarterbacks and porn stars, who wants to max out at age thirty-one?

I am not a believer in predestination. But the ancient Greeks, the folks whose myths are driving my current excursion, were consumed by it. They believed their fortunes were at the mercy of the Morae—the three sisters known collectively as the Fates. Clotho, the youngest, spun the thread of life. Lachesis, the middle sister, measured it with a rod. Atropos, the oldest, snipped it with shears when Death arrived. It was said that even Zeus was powerless against them.

However, the mythic Morae determined not only the time and manner of one's death but also one's lifelong destiny. A thousand years after Homer's day, an Athenian sophist named Flavius Philostratus mused that the threads that the Fates spin are so unalterable that "a man who the Fates have decreed that he shall be an eminent archer will not miss the mark, even though he lost his eyesight." But I have begun to wonder if I was fated to slightly miss the mark.

"Brad Herzog. Remember the name," began a *USA Today* story in the midst of my fleeting media maelstrom. "He just might be the next Stephen King or John Grisham." Surely I am the only reader who recalls the words, but they now strike me as having a DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN quality to them. Acquaintances will refer to my *Millionaire* moment and joke that I somehow managed to double my fifteen minutes of fame. But I didn't seek

fleeting tabloid renown, and I have no desire that my obituary someday begin with a reference to a TV quiz show. In the long run, I became neither rich nor famous—just a bit more professionally established and briefly celebrated for being momentarily well-known.

Now I am pushing forty. I seem to have aches where I didn't know I had muscles, rogue hairs where I didn't realize I had follicles, and frustration where I wasn't aware I had ambition. I have reached that psychochronological tipping point at which my life is no longer entirely a forward-looking phenomenon, and sporadic regrets have begun to creep in like cockroaches. And I am being beckoned to the place where my grandiose dreams took root.

It has been nearly two decades since I first arrived in Ithaca, unpacking my bags and my potential. What kind of existence have I crafted for myself? Can I claim to have lived a good life? Are my contributions in any way heroic? And in contemporary America, what constitutes a heroic life anyhow?

Funny thing is, I am wholly satisfied with my surroundings. How many people can say that? I lucked into an adorable and compassionate wife, two precious sons, loyal friends, and a fine house in a charming town. What I can't figure out is why, amid so much external contentment, I can harbor so much disillusionment. Lately, my angst has coalesced into a bit of a black cloud over my head, and it has begun to permeate the small world that means everything to me.

I used to write from the heart—experimentally, enthusiastically. But in recent years my grand literary dreams have softened into moderate ambitions revolving around paying the mortgage. Whereas once I was inspired by a shifting view of the big picture, now I constantly find myself sweating the small stuff, micromanaging my family like a retired guy who hangs around the house and annoys everybody—only I may never be able to afford retirement. I have bouts of irritability, periods in which I have difficulty living in the moment, times where I notice my innate cynicism evolving into a sort of nihilistic grunt.

I don't want to be *that guy*. My wife doesn't want it either.

Amy is always the optimist, impossibly sunny—a Pooh to my Eeyore—and she has taken on the tiring responsibility of bolstering my sense of self-worth. But when I begin to cross the line—when my unreasonable expectations are thrust on my life partner and two little boys, who, after all,

will be boys—her exhaustion turns to exasperation. The last thing I want is to unravel my near-perfect universe because I can't come to grips with my own imperfections.

"Go take a drive," Amy insisted. "I'll meet you in Ithaca."

I might have taken this to mean simply that I should light out after the kind of self-knowledge that only a journey can provide, that I should clear the existential cobwebs by crafting a unique itinerary through a nation's nooks and crannies, figuring it would take me to places I had not yet explored. But when she said it, she held my gaze for just a half-second longer than usual, a moment dripping with subtext.

Go away. Figure it out, she was saying. *Don't come back until you do*.

She looked at the calendar. "You have thirty-one days."

It was a Greek philosopher, Socrates, who believed, "The unexamined life is not worth living." And it was the son of French Canadian immigrants, Jack Kerouac, who opined, "The road is life." Some combustible combination of the two notions is the spark of my mission.

I have decided to let Homer ride shotgun. It was he, a supposedly blind minstrel nearly three millennia ago, who crafted the original hero's journey. Odysseus's was a practical quest—return home to his beloved isle of Ithaka after twenty years of war and wayward travel. But at its heart, the voyage of Odysseus represents an intellectual adventure. For all the gods and monsters he encounters, his is a pilgrimage toward an understanding of humanity.

In fact, much the same could be said about all ancient myths. "Society's dream" is how they were characterized by Joseph Campbell, the famed mythologist, who described myths as stories of man's constant search for meaning. The heroes are archetypes, replicated in many cultures over various ages. Their tests and ordeals are the wrappings of truth, a sort of collective unconscious, a vehicle for the communication of universal insight—all in the guise of a good yarn. In other words, we were not made in the image of gods; gods were made in our image—our fears, our foibles, our fantasies. In my journey, I am not aspiring to the deeds of ancient heroes; rather those ancient heroes are manifestations of the symbolic expression of my psyche.

I don't claim to be Odysseus. It is simply the other way around.

So Campbell will be a key companion of mine too, sitting in the back, occasionally looking over Homer's shoulder. Our ride is a cushy little house on wheels—a twenty-six-foot Winnebago Aspect, which is the perfect name, given my quest. It suggests a facet, a part of a whole—a component of the big picture. Campbell, an atheist's icon, will have to share space back there with a pastor-turned-philosopher because I brought a collection of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays along—treatises on concepts like Power, Truth, and Experience, just in case I need a dose of nineteenth-century self-reliance. So this is my traveling band—Homer navigating blindly, while a mythologist and a transcendentalist try to help me determine exactly where his tales should lead me.

My goal: Visit with other lives. Explore other places. Find coherence in the diversity I am sure to encounter. Accumulate the knowledge of journeys past and present as I rumble toward an under standing of the heroic ideal. Locate exemplars of that elusive concept. Court adventure and epiphany and insight. Then come home in one piece, and possibly at peace with myself.

I descend the Space Needle and spend an hour wandering around Seattle's trendy Belltown neighborhood, past assorted sushi bars and billiard halls and jazz clubs. Nothing much catches my eye until I reach… the single eye. Here it is, on the corner of First Avenue and Wall Street—blue-irised, red-lidded, rimmed in neon orange. It hangs over the sidewalk, three-dimensional and hypnotic, protruding from a red brick building. I have stumbled upon the Cyclops Café.

Seattle's Cyclops Café

The menu sounds appealing, in an ocular sort of way—a Greek-tinged Cyclops Omelette, a two-egg meal called the Bi-clops, drinks with names like Eye Caramba and Pink Eye—but it is midafternoon, too early for dinner. The door is locked, the lights dim, the chairs stacked on tables. This is one Cyclops lair that will have to remain unexplored.

I consider this a good omen. Odysseus would have been wise to skip it himself. Early in his journey, when he and his twelve ships catch sight of the Island of the Cyclops—a race of precommunal cave dwellers—Odysseus's prudence loses out to his curiosity. He takes a handful of men to the island, enters a cave, and starts feasting on the food there, only to be somehow surprised when the resident one-eyed giant, Polyphemus, returns. The Cyclops places a massive boulder in front of the cave entrance to trap his uninvited visitors and proceeds to cannibalize a few of them.

Odysseus utilizes his famed cunning to extract himself from the situation—first getting the Cyclops drunk and then, when he falls asleep, using a fire-sharpened pole to destroy the creature's single eye. In the morning, when blinded Polyphemus moves the boulder so that his sheep may graze outside, Odysseus and his men, who have tied themselves to the animals' undersides, are able to escape.

But this scene is really a tale of Odysseus's flaws. Hubris book-ends the story. First, he deems his personal curiosity more important than the safety of his crew. Then, after their escape, his excessive pride puts them at even greater risk. When Polyphemus first asks his visitor's name, Odysseus calls himself Noman. After being blinded, Polyphemus cries out to his fellow Cyclops that Noman has hurt him. So they don't intervene. Clever move. But as Odysseus sails away, he stoops to perhaps history's first account of trash-talking, shouting, "If ever anyone asks you who put out your ugly eye, tell them your blinder was Odysseus, the conqueror of Troy, the son of Laertes, whose address is in Ithaka." Bad move. Turns out Polyphemus is one of the sons of Poseidon, who will take vengeance on Odysseus by constantly driving him away from his home and happiness, precipitating some ten years of wandering.

This is why I can identify with this ancient king of Ithaka. Although he claims to be Noman, he is essentially Everyman, in the sense that he is far from perfect. In the course of his adventures, Odysseus lies, steals, and schemes. He can be clear-minded and determined and remarkably courageous, but at times he is also distrustful and devious and hypocritical

and merciless. He is not a particularly successful leader: His men often ignore his warnings and pay dearly for doing so, and he loses every single one of his ships and crew. His wife, Penelope, a daughter of Spartan royalty, is the very paragon of fidelity, yet he certainly isn't faithful to her during his long journey home. And when he finally reaches Ithaka, he murders the dozens of unarmed men who have been courting her, thinking her husband long dead.

Even physically, Homer describes Odysseus as unimposing. In the *Iliad*, an older man points to him and asks who the fellow is "who is shorter by a head than Agamemnon." Later, another admits, "No other man alive could come near Odysseus. But then we did not think him so very much to look at." By the time of the *Odyssey*, he is probably well into his forties, maybe with bags under his eyes from his constant travails, possibly out of shape. Even one-eyed Polyphemus calls him a "short worthless-looking runt." You know you are no physical marvel when you are dissed by a Cyclops.

So Odysseus is the prototype of not only the hero but also all *flawed* fictional heroes who followed. He is why Superman falls prey to kryptonite and Sherlock Holmes prefers his 7 percent solution and Indiana Jones hates snakes. And for a guy like me—somewhat vertically challenged, battling a paunch, not always taking the high road—his is a template to which I can relate.

Come to think of it, my imperfection has been immortalized. You see, there is one final addendum to my *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* tale. A few weeks after the silliness subsided, the phone rang. It was a fellow from Grolier, the folks who publish *The Encyclopedia Americana*. They were putting together *The Americana Annual*, a six-hundred-page recap of the events of the year 2000. Could I write 800 words about the history of quiz shows and the current craze? Sure, I said, only a tad reluctantly. At least it's one way to get into the encyclopedia. The lesson: When revealing aspirations, be specific.

Several months later, the volume arrived, a handsomely bound yearbook with Al Gore and George Bush awkwardly shaking hands on the cover. Squeezed in between an account of "Monkeys in Peril" and a spread about tall ships was my summary of quiz show history. To my surprise, the article began with a half-page color photo of my final moments on the *Millionaire* set. So in perpetuity, anyone can turn to page 90 of the 2001 *Americana*

Annual and catch the forever frozen image of me sitting in the hot seat, smiling wanly at my old pal Regis, having just failed a test of courage.

II

family plots

The original *Encyclopedia Britannica*, published nearly a century ago, described suicide as “an act of cowardice disguised as heroism.” It is a fascinating perspective, and it may have its origins in the ancient Greek myths, which are rife with dozens of tales of men and women who find death preferable to a troubled life. They hang themselves, stab themselves, drink poison, self-castrate, leap into the sea, and hurl themselves into the mouths of dragons. Usually, the gods are to blame.

At about the time of the inaugural *Britannica*, my great-great-great uncle took an easier route than most of the ancients. He simply shot himself—after shooting someone else. I am on a mission to find him and perhaps figure out why.

I have made this my first task because I have decided that I cannot examine the parameters of a heroic life without first considering the phenomenon of personal expectations. How does one’s course compare to one’s potential and, more important, to one’s aspirations? If the decision to end it all may be oversimplified and described as an extreme reaction to an existence unfulfilled, doesn’t it boil down to expectations? What society expects of us. What we expect of our world. What we expect of ourselves. And if the expectations are so unreasonable that they are all but impossible to meet, what is the source of such high standards?

So I am making my way toward a cemetery in eastern Washington, but first I am lunching in Paradise, a thin-aired hamlet at the foot of massive Mount Rainier that receives nearly seven hundred inches of snowfall annually. It is midday in mid-May, and the sun has turned the blanket of snow around me into a billion crystalline wonders. As my companion Emerson once put it, on “one of those celestial days when heaven and earth meet and adorn each other, it seems a poverty that we can only spend it once.”

The mountain as holy place is a notion present in nearly every culture, of course, and in every era—whether it be Mount Fuji to the Japanese or the

Smoky Mountains to the Cherokee or Ararat and Sinai in Judeo-Christian teachings. We celebrate them as an opportunity to rise above humanity, literally and figuratively. Really, they are metaphors for aspirations.

Alpinists seem to find the climb itself—the challenge—to be a sort of stairway to the realm and the revelations of the gods. In 1950, when Maurice Herzog (no relation to my decidedly earth-bound family) reached the peak of Annapurna, at the time the highest mountain ever summited, he returned with the conviction that "in touching the extreme boundaries of man's world, we have come to know something of its true splendor." Those concerned with the big picture—the philosophers and photographers among us—tend to find a glimpse of immortality in the view. If one accepts the contention, articulated even in ancient times, that gods are heroes glorified over time, then these two perspectives of the mount might represent the dichotomy of the Hero, of what constitutes heroic attempt—ascent versus awareness, effort versus insight, the challenge of overcoming man's limitations versus the possibility of actually understanding them.

The story of Odysseus embodies both. His is a search for both Ithaka and illumination. Joseph Campbell's blueprint for all myths, which he called the nuclear unit of the monomyth, is simply the following: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." The last part, while it may be least exciting, is actually most important. It implies that one falls short of the heroic ideal if there is achievement without understanding, forces overcome without lessons learned and dispersed—that is, if you climb the mountain without absorbing the view.

But while this might be paradise after all, someday it will be annihilated. Mount Rainier is an active volcano, one of more than a dozen in the Cascade Range. Volcanologists keep an especially wary eye on it because a large lava eruption would melt the white sheet covering its massive dome—more snow and ice than all the other Cascade volcanoes combined—and send a flood of mud and rock rushing toward the river valleys that radiate from the mountain.

Less than fifty miles south of here and almost exactly twenty-five years earlier, a tremendous blast blew the top off Mount St. Helens. An ash column rose more than fifteen miles and dumped volcanic dust across the

Northwest. A hundred-mile-per-hour landslide covered twenty-three square miles and left debris and ash as much as six hundred feet deep. Fifty-seven people died. By contrast, Rainier's environs are far more populated than those surrounding Mount St. Helens; more than three million people live within one hundred miles of the mountain.

The ancient Greeks knew nothing of magma reservoirs, of course. To them, the rumble and steam from volcanoes were the hammer and forge of Hephaestus, the blacksmith of Olympus, god of fire and metallurgy. Unlike the other gods, who were usually portrayed as having exceptional beauty, he was short, fat, and, most remarkably, disabled—the result of being tossed from Olympus by either his mother, Hera, or his father, Zeus, depending on which version of parental rejection one prefers.

His is a mythos of great contradiction. He was a god, but he actually worked tirelessly, sweating over his fiery forge, wearing a smudged face and a sleeveless tunic. He was lame and ugly, yet he hammered out great power (Zeus's thunderbolts, Apollo's arrows) and unmatched beauty (the thrones of Olympus, Dionysus's golden cup). He was married to lovely Aphrodite, but her unfaithfulness led him to act on his vengeful desires, and so he tried to rape virginal Athena.

It was the three women in Hephaestus's life—Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera—whose I'm-prettier-than-you contest was judged by the Trojan prince Paris. Athena and Hera tried to bribe Paris with power and victory in battle, but Aphrodite promised him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. She was Helen, wife to the king of Sparta and daughter of the king of the gods, conceived during one of Zeus's frequent adulterous endeavors. But it was her own adulterous elopement with this Trojan prince that led to a god-squabble played out on an epic human scale, launching a thousand ships, one of them captained by the reluctant Odysseus, amid the ten-year Trojan War.

Both mythographies—Hephaestus the unwanted god and Helen the wanted woman, he the repulsive creator of beauty and she the beautiful seed of ruination—share similar, almost paradoxical motifs: ugly attractiveness, blighted purity. The existence of a Mount St. Helens, bearing the forge of the god and the name of the woman—or a Rainier, even grander and deadlier—would seem to be a lesson in moderating expectations. The ability to both inspire and obliterate is a reminder that, however heroic we

may deem ourselves, we are earthbound and at the mercy of something greater. They are monuments to the impossibility of perfection.

A few hours later, I have come upon a high desert mirage for the atomic age. In the distance, out past the sagebrush, beneath an armada of cumulus clouds, a cluster of smokestacks and boxy buildings rise from the flatlands of Benton County like rows of Montecristos and packs of Marlboros. It is what John Steinbeck used to call the "yellow smoke of progress." The forested mounds of western Washington have flattened into the dry grasslands of eastern Washington, and I am driving along the fringe of a 560-square-mile region over-seen by the Department of Energy—the Hanford site, an anti-oasis if ever there was one.

Two centuries earlier, when Lewis and Clark arrived at this curve in the Columbia River, they found the remains of Indian villages dating from prehistoric times. Today, more than 120,000 people reside in the Tri-Cities of Richland, Pasco, and Kennewick. Most of them are here because a few scientists discovered the devastating potential of nuclear fission.

With the launch of the Manhattan Project in January 1943, Hanford, a tiny farming community here in Benton County, was chosen as the nation's first large-scale plutonium production site. The area was selected for its distance from major population centers, its accessibility to railroad transportation, its semi-arid climate, and the fact that the Columbia River offered plenty of cold water to cool reactors, while nearby dams made abundant and inexpensive electricity available. As for the folks who lived there, the War Powers Act allowed the government to buy the land and force all the residents to move within a month. By March, more than fifty thousand construction workers were living in makeshift housing (Hanford immediately became Washington's fourth most populous city), and only a few dozen people knew what the hell they were building.

Just thirteen months later, Hanford's first nuclear reactor went online. Plutonium manufactured at Hanford was used in the first atomic bomb tested at New Mexico's Trinity Site and the second atomic bomb ever used in warfare—the "Fat Man" bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Afterward, the newspaper in Richland shouted, "IT'S ATOMIC BOMBS," reporting that the reaction in the Hanford area was "disbelief…followed by enthusiasm." Richland High School adopted "Bombers" as its nickname. The school's

coat of arms featured an adorable mushroom cloud. You can buy bumper stickers there—still, to this day—that declare, PROUD OF THE CLOUD.

These days, Hanford's reactors lie dormant, but the Tri-Cities continue to thrive, based not on what is produced here but rather on what has accumulated. The Hanford Nuclear Reservation is the largest nuclear waste dump in the Western Hemisphere. It is one of the most toxic places on earth. Nearly 10,000 workers are involved in what has been called the world's largest environmental cleanup. Their task: Guard 25 tons of plutonium (which has a half-life of some 24,000 years), dig up 10 million tons of contaminated soil, mitigate 2,300 tons of corroded nuclear fuel rods sitting in two huge indoor pools that might at any time crack open during an earthquake and spill into the Columbia, and clean up more than 50 million gallons of radioactive and chemical waste stored in 177 underground tanks, each the size of a three-story building, many of which are leaking. It is a task worthy of Hercules, and the cleanup will last for decades.

So here is the man-made version of the volcanic metaphor. Native American writer Sherman Alexie, who grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation, about one hundred miles north of the Hanford site, has observed how myth and science are "first cousins who strongly resemble each other and passionately hate the resemblance." It could be argued that at some point, when we began messing with the atom and developing enough destructive power to obliterate the planet, we started poaching the divine powers. Our aspirations out-paced our aptitude.

Indeed, a great many mythological tales warn of the dangers of hubris. Arachne challenges Athena to a weaving contest and is forever transformed into a spider. Phaethon learns that his father is Helios, god of the sun, and tries to drive his chariot across the sky, only to be struck dead by a thunderbolt from Zeus. Sisphyus, believing his cleverness surpasses that of Zeus, is left to constantly roll a huge rock up a hill in the underworld, only to have it roll back down just as he reaches the top. The Greeks and their gods didn't much care for overweening pride.

And what is that middle ground between earthbound man and divinity? The hero. The paragon of humankind. But given that even the gods seem to have their flaws—a constant narrative of jealousy, rage, arrogance, infidelity—I have to remind myself again as I stumble forward that although the heroic may be the ideal, there is room for imperfection.

Perhaps the best indication that the hero has long been viewed as a sort of God Lite is the fact that most of antiquity's most celebrated heroes were born of a union between the human and the divine. Hercules and Perseus, for instance, were direct offspring of ever-philandering Zeus. However, Odysseus was a man of comparatively low birth. For one thing, his parents —Laertes and Anticleia—were human. Yes, Laertes was king of Ithaka, but Ithaka was just a rocky, barren island on the fringes of what was then the Mycenaean civilization. Odysseus's maternal grandfather, Autolycus, was a thief—a notorious, brilliant expert at trickery but a thief nonetheless. It is from him that Odysseus received his oft-mentioned wiles, not to mention the helmet he wore during the Trojan War. His gramps had stolen it.

Of course, Autolycus was said to be the son of Hermes, the god of thieves, and he inherited some impressive skills. And since Hermes was the son of Zeus, that would make Odyseus the great-great-grandson of the king of the gods. But by Hellenistic hero standards, that ain't much. This I admire about Odysseus, not least because I am on a mission to find the murderer in my ancestry.

I had always thought my paternal roots were firmly entrenched in Chicago, where I and my father and his parents were born and raised. I figured a handful of folks came over from the Old World sometime in the late nineteenth century and made straight for the Windy City—until my paternal grandmother began to tell me foggy tales of how *her* family came to Chicago via eastern Washington, somewhere near Walla Walla. She claimed, though there was conviction missing from her voice, that a family patriarch was awarded plots of land in eastern Washington in gratitude for his gallantry in battle. One of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, she seemed to recall. Or something like that.

But then I talked with a cousin of mine one day, and he shrugged his shoulders at the Rough Rider reference. Instead, he mentioned rumors of a sordid event in the family history—a disgruntled uncle, a mystery, a murder-suicide. Rumor has it that this uncle is buried, he said, in a small town called Dayton, about an hour west of Washington's Tri-Cities along a road touted as the Lewis and Clark Forgotten Trail.

These days, it is a trek through farmland, much of it nearly vertical. The layered hills—dark green wheat fields, light green pea fields, brown fallow

soil—look like striped gumdrops. Just west of Dayton, on the north side of Highway 12, one of the foothills comes alive in the shape of a giant—a green giant, actually, over three hundred feet tall and made of colored eight-by-twelve-inch patio blocks set into the hillside.

My Homer-saturated mind conjures up images of gigantic cannibals—the Laestrygonians, who welcome three envoys sent by Odysseus by grabbing one of them and preparing him for dinner. When the other two men race back to the harbor, the Laestrygonians rush in from every direction and toss massive boulders at Odysseus's ships, smashing them to pieces. Then they spear the men like fish, carrying them home for supper. The confrontation amounts to all of a dozen lines in Homer's epic, but in an instant Odysseus loses eleven of his twelve ships—all but his own.

This is typical of Homer, by the way. He spends only a few lines describing horrific scenes: sinking ships, terrifying maelstroms, ghastly deaths. But he uses dozens of lines to explain how Odysseus's old wet nurse recognizes him upon his return to Ithaka by a scar he received while hunting a wild boar as a young man. It is a strange imbalance of event and exposition, but it isn't necessarily inconsistent with Homer's intent. The *Odyssey* is a story about a man's journey home, rather than simply a man's journey.

Regardless, the all-too-brief encounter with the cannibals begins with an encounter with a sturdy girl who is drawing water from a spring. She points the men toward her home, where they expect to be welcomed as traveling strangers. *Beware your friends*, the scene seems to suggest—which, it turns out, well describes the tale of the green giant.

The hillside giant is the logo of the Green Giant label, which was long represented here in Columbia County by the Seneca Foods asparagus cannery. For seven decades, the cannery reigned as one of the major employers in the region—until 2004, when Seneca announced it would shift its operations to Peru, where workers earn in a day what Americans make in an hour. The Dayton facility, touted as the largest in the world, had been the last remaining asparagus cannery in the state, and the move left a huge void in Columbia County's economy, eliminating thousands of full-time and seasonal jobs in a region with a total population of only 4,100 people. But the green giant is still there, decorating the hillside, only now it must seem like a massive chalk body outline at a crime scene.

For the time being, Dayton remains a charming little community, the kind of nineteenth-century hamlet—with the oldest continuously operating courthouse in the state and the oldest train depot—that clings to the significance of its past amid a modern world that has rendered the place largely insignificant. It has been the Columbia County seat since 1875. I head for the public library, where a woman named Liz assists me in my exploration; we go through old newspapers, census records, deed records, history books. And a story begins to emerge.

There were no Rough Riders in my family. I come from a long line of Dry Cleaners and Insurance Brokers. If old Teddy Roosevelt wanted his shirts pressed or his claims paid, we were of heroic stock. Adolph Roth made it to America first, emigrating from Austria-Hungary to New York City in 1873 at the age of eighteen. How and why he found his way to the southeastern corner of Washington remains a mystery, but he did so less than a decade later, well before the Spanish-American War. He was the first of three Roth brothers to arrive.

By 1883, the Adolph Roth Mercantile Company was advertising in the *Columbia Chronicle*. Adolph married a woman from New York a few years later, and they raised three daughters and a son in Dayton. The son died suddenly at the age of five in February 1906 and was buried in Dayton Cemetery. Almost immediately thereafter, Adolph must have moved his family to San Francisco, just in time for the city's infamous earthquake. Records show that Adolph wrote to his brother to tell him about the unfortunate timing.

Henry Roth, the oldest Roth brother, was the second to come over, following his brother to Dayton in 1895 and lasting about fifteen years there, before moving to Chicago, where he and his sons ran a dry cleaning business. Henry was my great-great-grandfather. The story I always heard about his second son, my great-grandfather, was that he was originally called Otto. However, for some reason he despised the fact that his name could be spelled the same forward as backward. So he renamed himself after his uncle—Adolph. History will record that as lousy timing, too.

Of the original immigrants, there was also a third son. His name was Joseph. My grandmother, Celia Roth, is in her nineties now but still as sharp as the spear of Achilles. She lived across the street from her grandfather in Chicago and heard tales of his brother, the elder Adolph. But

she had never heard of the other brother, Joseph. Apparently, the family was keen on keeping him a secret.

This I know: Joe Roth was born in Hungary in 1862. He lived in Dayton for a dozen years, and he is buried in Dayton. In between, he lived in Hermiston, Oregon, for four years, and he died there, violently. After a good deal of digging, I discover the family secret on the front page of the *Columbia Chronicle*, dated June 3, 1916, which reprinted a report of a few days earlier from the *Hermiston Herald*:

> Goaded on by a crazed brain crying for a righting of fancied wrongs, Joe Roth Thursday lay in wait for James Ralph, shooting him twice, and a moment later turned the gun to his own head and fired. The shooting took place just a few minutes past 9 Thursday evening. There was no warning and both apparently died instantly.
>
> James Ralph had been out riding during the evening and on his return ran his car up to the front door of the Sapper Bros. garage. This large door has no lock on it nor a means of opening it from the outside. The garage was closed and Mr. Ralph did not have a key to the side door. He knew, however, that by taking a screwdriver he could lift the door sufficiently to get his fingers under and then raise it. He did this and just as he succeeded in raising the door as high as his shoulders there were two shots in quick succession and Mr. Ralph fell backward to the walk. A moment later a third shot was fired…

It seems that both Joe Roth and James Ralph had worked at the Dayton Electric and Power Company, which brought the first electric lights to the town. In 1912, both sold out and moved about one hundred miles southwest to Hermiston, where they purchased interests in the Hermiston Power and Light Company. At the time of the shooting, Joe was the company's president; James was the vice president and general manager. Again, *beware your friends*.

Apparently, that night Joe came home from work and sat for a while with the evening paper. Then he left, telling his wife and two daughters that he was going to the office. That is the last they saw him alive. Joe seems to

have gained entry to the garage through a side door. He left through a rear door and was found behind the building with a bullet in his head. A revolver with the spent bullets was found next to his body; another revolver with one exploded shell was found in his coat pocket.

Records indicate that in 1909, at least, Joe Roth lived at 703 South Third Street in Dayton. But there is no 703 South Third Street; it is an absent address, although it would have been located across the street from what is now the high school gymnasium. So instead, I trudge to Dayton Cemetery, where Adolph Roth bought a dozen plots 115 years earlier. The city clerk informs me that, had I arrived only a few years earlier—before the city changed its policy on such things—I could have sold nine plots back to the city for $800 each. Again, bad timing.

In section A, I find a trio of gravestones in a neat row. Two belong to Adolph Roth's children—ten-week-old May and five-year-old Sammie. The third, a square slab of granite, smaller and less adorned, is Joseph Roth's. He was fifty-four.

The final resting place of Joe Roth in Dayton, Washington

I stand there, listening to the birds chirp blissfully, and I think back to the last words of the *Hermiston Herald*'s account of the tragedy: "Mr. Roth was a kind, loving husband and father." So what caused Joe Roth's descent

into madness? Did he discover that Ralph had embezzled money? Was he trying to cover up his own thievery? Had he found Ralph in bed with his wife? Had the stress of business led him to snap? Or was he a man destroyed by miscommunication? Did he simply think Ralph was a burglar trying to enter the garage? Then again, why was Joe in the garage in the first place?

There are no real answers, only clues, as gleaned from the newspapers: "Mr. Roth was in Dayton several weeks ago, and it was noted at that time that he was worried about something, but no one knew what it was…. It is also learned that for the past two years Mr. Roth has wanted to buy the electric plant and own it all to himself, but Mr. Ralph did not want to sell…. Mr. Roth had a bruise on the back of his head which cannot be accounted for unless it was caused from falling."

Most intriguing to me is the third bullet. Why did he kill himself? Was he distraught over his place in life? Or was he remorseful over his involvement in death?

Among the myriad tales of suicide in the ancient Greek myths, several are directly tied to Odysseus himself, including the death of his mother, whom Odysseus had thought very much alive. But when he encounters her spirit during his trip to the underworld, she tells him, "It was no disease that made me pine away, but I missed you so much, and your clever wit and your gay merry ways, and life was sweet no longer, so I died."

Still if I were to guess at what might have driven Joe Roth to murder-suicide, I might point to Odysseus's experiences in Troy. The legendary Ajax, tallest and strongest of all the Achaeans and second only to Achilles as a warrior, is the only main character in the *Iliad* whose prowess on the battlefield is absent any help from the gods. With the death of Achilles at Troy, Ajax and Odysseus both claim his armor for themselves. Both men deliver speeches, and Odysseus, far more eloquent, takes the prize. Ajax then goes into a narcissistic rage, vowing to kill the Greek leaders who deprived him of what he considers his rightful inheritance. It is a tale of unmet expectations.

To stop Ajax, Athena makes him temporarily insane, and so he slaughters a flock of sheep instead, mistaking them for his former comrades-in-arms. It has been described as vengeance against the social order, a rebellion against the notion of honoring a negotiator over a true warrior. When his madness leaves him, blood on his hands, his honor

diminished, he sees death as the only way to reestablish his heroic stature. He fastens a sword to the ground and falls on it.

So maybe Joe Roth was equally enraged by the order of things. Perhaps he, too, considered himself worthy of sole ownership and went mad when his ambitions were thwarted. It could be that he came to his senses in time to see the blood on his hands and did what he considered to be the only honorable thing.

I can only hope that my great-great-great uncle was humbled by his grave error in judgment, perhaps understanding—as I am beginning to—that obsessing about unrealized life goals might only serve to undermine a life entirely. Ajax? He never learned. When Odysseus visits the underworld, all his fallen comrades-in-arms are there. He speaks with Achilles and Agamemnon and Patroclus…but Ajax simply walks away in silence.

III

athena

“Should I call you Mr. President?”

The man loosens his grip on the lawn mower and offers a smile and a handshake. “Bill would be fine.”

I am in Oregon now, some fifty miles southwest of Dayton, having enjoyed a gorgeous drive that took me through quintessential rolling hills to a hamlet called Athena, home to about 1,200 God-fearing souls. It wasn’t always Athena. When a New Yorker named Darwin Richards settled the area in 1866, the stagecoach operators who stopped there called it Richards’ Station. Later, the town that sprang up was known as Centerville, as it was halfway between Pendleton and Walla Walla, which must have seemed like metropolises back in the day. But, predictably, there were already a few Centervilles in the region. So a local school superintendent, a classical scholar, suggested a name change. He claimed the hills of what is now called Umatilla County were similar to those around Athens, Greece. So Athena it became.

And why not? There is no harm in aiming high when christening a settlement. You can harbor big-city dreams, and since a community far outlasts its original settlers, you don’t have to deal with the angst of unrealized expectations. So it seems sensible enough to name a burgeoning hamlet after an immortal, especially one who ranked among the most feared and revered of the Olympians. Particularly in Athena, though, birth seems to have been accompanied by lofty aspirations. Among the town’s early settlers was a fellow named Isaac Newton Richardson, a minister and dentist. His relatives included George Washington Richardson, Thomas Jefferson Richardson, Benjamin Franklin Richardson, Andrew Jackson Richardson, and Lewis Clark Richardson. To be sure, living up to such names seems an unenviable challenge, but it is significant that more than a few Americans choose to saddle their offspring with such historical burdens. The Leader of Men is a hero for all time.

I suppose I am here in Athena to explore exactly what that makes the rest of us.

“I’m a fifth-generation Athenian,” Bill Hansell begins. He is sixty years old, with a head of white hair that is thinning but hanging on gamely and glasses set in rectangular frames that rest slightly askew on his face. He leads me into his living room and hands me a soda, and for the next twenty minutes I hear a family history like something out of a James Michener novel.

The paternal side of Bill’s family reached the West Coast via the Oregon Trail, settling in the Willamette Valley. Two sets of families made the trek together, each with teenaged children. Two of these teenagers fell in love and, as many pioneers did, returned to land that they passed through along the way—back to Umatilla County. They raised a daughter, who married a carpenter named George Hansell, a fellow who had come out from the Midwest on the train.

One of George’s children, M. W. Hansell, used his eighth-grade education to become a horse trader—literally, rounding up strays and selling them in the Athena area. He had a business partner whose family boarded a schoolteacher assigned to a one-room schoolhouse out in the country. She and M. W. fell in love, but she told him, “I don’t want to be the gypsy wife of an itinerant horse trader. If you’re serious about marriage, then I want roots.” So they bought a 640-acre farm just north of Athena, raising wheat and peas. The family eventually got into ranching, too, primarily a cattle and hog operation. But M. W. never quite lost his horse trader’s instincts, which paid off considerably during the Great Depression when he purchased another 640 acres, much of it covered by forest, for

$640. When he died nearly a half-century later, the family sold the timber from that section of land to Boise Cascade for nearly three quarters of a million dollars.

“That money paid the inheritance tax and saved the ranch,” Bill says with a grin.

Bill’s mother, Joyce, was a pharmacist. His father, also named Bill, was a veterinarian who was shipped over to China during World War II, where he doctored animals as they came over the Himalayas. When he came back home, he decided to return to farming, which is all he ever desired in the first place.

“So my dad is one of the few people who, for his entire adult life, did exactly what he wanted to do more than anything else in the world,” says Bill, and he says it with great pride in his voice, as if it represents the pinnacle of existence. Which, come to think of it, it damn well might.

The younger Bill, on the other hand, didn’t much care for farming. He had been born when his father was overseas, and it may be impossible to have a more enviable birth date than his: He arrived on 01/23/45. Bill lived in Athena until the third grade, then moved to the family ranch and was raised on the farm. At the University of Oregon, he met his wife, Margaret. They were married during their senior year.

“When I enrolled, John Kennedy was in the White House. Everybody had a crew cut. I remember an article about what a unique thing it was on campus that one of the professors had a beard. As far as I know, the only drug on campus was alcohol. And I couldn’t have found Vietnam on a world map if my life depended on it,” says Bill. “By the time I graduated four years later, we had Vietnam, Berkeley, the Summer of Love, the riots, just a cauldron of turmoil.”

Bill was the furthest thing from a radical. In fact, after he graduated with a degree in political science, he and Margaret joined the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ, an interdenominational ministry dedicated to spreading the gospel of Jesus.

“I knew a lot about God, but I never recall feeling that I had a personal relationship with Him. I remember hearing how many of my peers made decisions. They were telling me they heard God’s call, and I was envious because I wasn’t hearing any voices or seeing any direction. I remember praying and saying, ‘God, I’m willing to do anything you want me to do,

but I need to know it's Your call on my life. I don't want to just respond to something emotionally. And unless You lead, I'm going to law school."

Instead, Bill was assigned to minister in Berkeley, of all places, in the summer of 1967—quite a revelation, if you will, to a straitlaced Oregon farm boy. Apparently, God has a sense of humor.

There is a touch of Odysseus in Bill's account. Early in the *Odyssey*, Aeolus, king of the winds, takes measure of our protagonist's run of misfortune and suspects that he must be hated by the gods. Odysseus himself is tempted to agree. But over the course of his adventure, he learns to trust in the gods, specifically Athena, who becomes to him the voice of the Olympians. In Joseph Campbell's monomyth, Athena is the model of supernatural aid—"a protective figure…who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass." So Odysseus's spiritual journey is much the same one Bill has made (and I have not)—passage from uncertainty to faith.

"I was born again," Bill announces. "I know at times that has a negative connotation, but that was the experience I had."

After Berkeley, Bill and Margaret ministered for six years in Sacramento and for another five in Sydney, Australia, before returning to Athena to raise their children in the kind of rural environment they preferred. For a few years, Bill worked on the family farm. But, he says, "Farming's pretty isolated. I'm more of a people person."

So he ran for public office instead, becoming Umatilla County commissioner in 1983. His is the kind of family history—intrepid pioneers, soldiers shipped to war, generations of farmers, and a country teacher and horse trader thrown in for good measure—that makes for a solid politician's backstory. But don't call him a politician.

"The word I've used is servant leader. You serve the people you lead, if you will. That's sort of the philosophy," says Bill. "My time in the ministry prepared me in a whole lot of ways for public office. I've never been a Christian candidate. I happen to be a Christian who's running for office. But I'm not part of the Religious Right or this or that. I am who I am. I pray for guidance. I pray for understanding of the issues. But that's not all I do. I study. I do the research. I get the background."

Umatilla County commissioner Bill Hansell in Athena, Oregon

Here again, Athena is a suitable reference. She is a remarkable figure in Greek mythology, because she seems to represent two opposing concepts. On the one hand, Athena is boldness personified—from the very beginning. Her birth consists of splitting open the head of Zeus and climbing out fully formed and clad in armor with shield and spear at the ready (which is something I will have to remember the next time I hear one of my wife's friends claim that males could never endure the pain of childbirth). She is the goddess of war, who descends from Olympus and strides between the two armies at the battle of Troy.

But Athena is also unlike the other Olympians in that she has found a harmonious equilibrium between extremes. She is said to be the immortal who walks most often with the mortals, frequently taking human form, as if approximating humanity herself. While the other gods are rather one-dimensional in their behavior—Aphrodite the lustful, Ares the wrathful, Hermes the rogue—Athena seems more complex. She is belligerent in battle but benevolent in peace. Although she is the archetype of the invincible warrior and is credited with inventing the war chariot, she is also the goddess of intellect, a model of measured judgment, inventor of the flute and the potter's wheel.

Sometimes bold, sometimes conciliatory, appealing to various interests—of the twelve Olympians, Athena would seem to have made the best politician. She values cleverness above all, and what is Mount Olympus if not a jumble of faith and politics and concealed trickery?

Over two decades, Bill has been reelected county commissioner five times, usually going unopposed. He has served as president of the Association of Oregon Counties. About ten months before my arrival in Athena, he discovered that his most recent campaign had been fruitful and had multiplied his influence exponentially. He had been elected president of the National Association of Counties, an organization giving voice to the nation's 3,066 counties, nearly two-thirds of which are members, including most of the nation's largest.

Bill offers the usual motives for pursuing a career in public service—the joy of helping people, whether that means creating dozens of jobs by relocating a big business to the area or assisting an elderly lady on Cabbage Hill whose chickens won't come down from the rafters of her barn.

"In the county, I can help seventy-two thousand people," he explains. "When I was president of the state association, I could help several million people, most of whom had no idea who I was. All running for the national association did was expand my base."

But it seems to me that with this last campaign he also has entered the maelstrom of politics. He has testified before Congress and has visited the White House, shaking hands with the man who lives there. Bill's schedule in the weeks after my visit includes trips to Washington, Montana, Mississippi, Florida, New Mexico, even Germany. He is the face of a national organization, a sort of mega lobbyist.

More than that, he is a man in charge. And that is why I wanted to meet Bill Hansell. Because I most certainly am not.

Leadership is not a prerequisite for a heroic legacy, and it certainly doesn't guarantee one. But it is a fine start. The minions may do the dirty work, but the managers get the credit. History has never recorded the names of the frostbitten fellows who paddled Washington across the icy Delaware, imploring him to please sit down; or the brave Carthaginians who followed Hannibal over the Alps, dodging mountains of elephant crap—just as Homer never bothered with the names of Odysseus's men who were

snatched by the jaws of the monstrous Scylla or turned into swine by Circe. General, commander, emperor, king…those are the titles that allow access to immortality.

My driving buddy Emerson defined heroism as “a self-trust which slights the restraints of prudence.” I don’t seem to possess the fearlessness, the ambition, or the self-belief to strive for a position of leadership—and by that I mean management of any sort. I have pals from my days in Ithaca, old buddies whose juvenile antics are seared into my collegiate memory, and now they have titles like vice president for acquisitions and development. My close friend and neighbor since the age of four, a guy who was so terrified of junior high that he puked on the first day of school, is now president and CEO of a real estate development corporation. They have accepted the notion that much of professional life is predicated on hierarchy, and they have impressed their way toward the top. They have underlings and personal assistants—people who actually answer the phone on their behalf.

In contrast, I have crafted a career in which I am my own boss but also my only employee. I am instinctively antiauthoritarian, so I have never been much of a follower. But I am also uncomfortable with the idea of giving instructions, evaluating performance, handing down grand decisions that actually affect the lives of other professionals. Not that I wouldn’t mind a minion or two, but it is enough of a challenge for me to take responsibility for myself. And I am not sure I would ever feel entitled to such a position.

“This is not an endowment. It’s not something that people owe to me. I’ve been hired by them through the voting mechanism to perform a service. I never take it for granted,” says Bill.

“And what about politics, in general?” I wonder. “What kinds of motivations have you seen?”

“I have found people who have run for office because they really focused on a single issue. I think that’s the wrong reason. I’ve seen people for whom it’s just an ego trip. I’ve seen people who have done it, believe it or not, for the benefits package. And I’ve seen people who are retired and bored and they think, ‘Hey, I’ll run for office.’ And sometimes, the people who go in maybe for the wrong reasons turn out pretty good.”

But it is the purpose-meets-poise aspect of leadership that dominates my thoughts—the self-assurance. There is the story of ancient Chaerephon, who traveled to Delphi and boldly asked Apollo to tell him if anyone had

greater intellectual powers than his friend Socrates. The oracle replied that no man was wiser. But when Socrates heard of this, he was dismayed. He did not believe he was the wisest, nor did he believe the oracle would tell an untruth. He concluded that it was a riddle of words—that no man was truly wise, only the gods, and that the only true wisdom is in knowing that you know nothing.

"As much as you may want to help people," I tell Bill, sounding a bit more cynical than I intend, "it seems to me that it requires a healthy ego—some sort of gene that leads you to say, 'I can do this. I'm worthy of this. I'm qualified and skilled and intelligent enough to be able to handle it and to be able to lead.'"

"If you're talking about confidence"—Bill smiles—"that often comes with experience."

During his brief college days, Bill was president of his dorm, fraternity representative on the student senate, and president of his junior class. On the other hand, I can think of only two times in my entire life when I accepted any sort of mantle of leadership. Just two.

When I was nearly fifteen years old and nearing the end of my six-summer stint as a camper at a boys' camp in northern Wisconsin, I was tapped to lead one of the teams during an all-camp competition. Back then, before political correctness reached the North Woods, the event was known as Pow Wow Day. The camp would divide into four tribes—Cherokee, Chippewa, Navajo, and Sioux—and compete in activities ranging from basketball to archery to canoeing relays. I was a Big Chief, which is about as close as I will ever come to CEO. Essentially, my role was to dress in faux Indian garb and convince a collection of several dozen campers that, no, they weren't just a bunch of scrawny suburbanites. They were the mighty Cherokee.

I well recall my first few Pow Wow Days, when I was nine or ten. I would stand openmouthed, marveling at the muscle and command of the big chiefs. They were *teenagers,* for goodness' sake, confident and vaguely heroic and ten feet tall and fully deserving of their lofty titles. Now that I was one of them—a nearsighted, shallow-chested, self-doubting big chief—it was like discovering that the great and terrible wizard was a bumbling oaf behind a curtain.

We mighty Cherokees lost each and every one of our first thirteen preliminary events—nearly a statistical impossibility. Ours was a comedic

montage of errant jump shots, missed targets, and tipped canoes. Heading into Pow Wow Day itself, we were already so far behind that victory was virtually unattainable. So I borrowed a notion from the Bill Murray movie *Meatballs*, which had been released a few years earlier, and led a procession of Cherokees through the dining hall at lunchtime: "It just doesn't matter! It just doesn't matter! It just doesn't matter!" And significantly, it didn't.

I wish I had recalled that sentiment four years later when I was a freshman in college and a fraternity pledge. For some reason, I decided it would be a sensible idea to run for pledge president. It was a "What was I thinking?" moment, not unlike the time when brave Odysseus arrived at the land of the Cyclops and said to his men, "My good fellows, the rest of you stay here, while I take my ship and crew and see who these people are; whether they are wild savages who know no law, or hospitable men who know right from wrong."

I suppose I wanted instant credibility in my new collective, having been previously acquainted with only a handful of my pledge brothers. So in this, the one leadership position I ever chose to pursue, I was motivated primarily by social panic. And what did I get out of it? I became a target for the slings and arrows of a bunch of upperclassmen drunk on power and Mad Dog grape wine. That semester, I lost ten pounds and earned the only C-minus of my life (in a philosophy class, no less), not to mention the enmity of a few of my pledge brothers, who fancied themselves Fletcher Christian to my Captain Bligh.

Of course, given their series of hardships, it is a wonder that Odysseus's men didn't plan a mutiny themselves. But I suspect that some men simply have the makeup of a leader, while the rest of us are easily revealed as mere imposters.

Bill, the rancher's son, likes to refer to his history working with the animals that populated the family farm. His constituents are smart, he says, more like hogs than sheep. From a farmer, that is a high compliment indeed, and it may well describe life's universal managerial system. But even wily Odysseus puts his trust in Athena, just as Bill often refers to the Twenty-third Psalm: *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want*.

We all need guidance, one way or the other. Heroic leadership, of course, is another animal entirely.

"Often, we view our heroes in response to a crisis situation and how they react to that—9/11 or Pearl Harbor. You save somebody from

drowning. You fight back a grizzly bear. You crash-land a plane to safety," says Bill. "Most of the time, in the average occupation, you don't have that type of crisis situation. I think politics probably fits into that as well. Even if you make a courageous vote, often the consequences of that aren't evident until years later."

The phone rings, and Bill answers it. He talks for a while in another room, pacing a bit while I sip my soda. Then he returns and adds a caboose to his previous train of thought.

"And anyway, the people whom I would most want to call me a hero are my children."

Bill's father was one of five children. His grandfather was one of five children. His great-grandfather was one of five children. Not counting the two foster children they took in and the four exchange students they housed, Bill and Margaret have raised five daughters, as well. They all graduated from college and pursued advanced degrees. They were Dean's List students and multisport letter winners, and one was even an NAIA college basketball All-American. Successful shepherding, no doubt.

But he also has a son, and for a while his son strayed. Bill has never touched a drink in his life. Dry Bill is what they called him in college. He has never allowed beer, wine, or any sort of alcohol in his house. But his son—who, yes, is also named Bill—became an alcoholic and drug addict.

For the better part of a decade, the family dealt with the struggle. The father turned again to the Twenty-third Psalm for explanation and comfort. *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou are with me*. The verse, he explains, refers to a practice in Palestine in which sheep were moved from winter quarters to spring and summer pastures, moving through valleys that were both life-giving and treacherous. The father focused on the "through" part of the verse, the suggestion that greener pastures await.

And then one day, the son woke up in a motel room in Idaho, full of self-loathing. He pulled out a Gideon Bible from the bedside stand and randomly opened it, his finger landing on Exodus 30. He interpreted the words according to his state of mind. *Thou shall not offer strange incense… nor shall you pour a drink offering on it….* He stood up, flushed his drugs down the toilet, poured out his booze, and called his dad.

"He just celebrated his first complete year of being clean and sober," says the father, and I can only guess at the sense of relief that must provide.

He smiles. “Do you have kids?”

I smile back.

My oldest son, Luke, was born nine months after my *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* adventure. In fact, he was conceived in a Manhattan hotel room the morning after the show was taped. What can I say? It was a good twenty-four hours. Given the circumstances, we considered naming our newborn Regis.

That is, we considered it a really bad idea.

His brother, Jesse, arrived only eighteen months later. The first child was the result of a carefully orchestrated bit of coupling and timing, following a few months of frustration and worry. His brother’s conception, on the other hand, was totally unexpected (although we are now grateful for the accidental miracle). We might have named them Luke and Fluke.

My sons are tiny, all innocence and devotion, energy and wonder. They are best pals who enjoy many shared enthusiasms, but I have grown to appreciate how their personalities have diverged. One is insightful, physical, and somewhat self-conscious. The other is inventive, artistic, and rather blissfully lacking in self-awareness. Two thousand years ago, Aristotle compared a child’s mind to “a tablet which bears no actual writing.” But he sorely underestimated human nature. My children are no more blank slates than was Odysseus when he first sailed from Troy.

But at this point in our lives, I am their journey-guide, and I revel in the role. For a few more years at least, they will view me as the ancients viewed Athena—a paragon of strength and wisdom, able to lift chairs over my head and open pickle jars and explain what happens when the toilet flushes.

“It’s a heck of a lot easier for a four-year-old to see me as a hero than for a thirty-four-year-old to see you as one,” I tell Bill.

“That’s exactly right,” he nods. “But you lay the foundation from which they launch. One of the primary goals of any parent is to prepare our lambs to be independent.”

My sons will experience great lows and great highs. The valleys beckon, as do the tops of mountains. Will their failings and successes be a reflection on me? In spite of me? Will their estimation of their father diminish as their innocence fades and their wonder weakens? On their own hero’s journey, will they heed the call for separation? Will they answer the call to return? And will they reach out to me when they need me?

So I have procreated myself into a position of leadership. My sons look up to me, if only because I am much taller than they. Back when I wore a faux Indian costume and led a parade of preteens around a summer camp, I could pretend on some absurd level that I was a molder of men. But now it is the real thing. And if I want them to love and respect me, I think I have to regain a love and respect for myself.

I can’t say it just doesn’t matter.

IV

troy

I am near Troy, and a fall appears to be imminent.

I have reached the far corner of Oregon—unspoiled and virtually unoccupied Wallowa County. High into the Wallowa Mountains, past snow-capped Sacajawea Peak, along the Hells Canyon Scenic Byway (those are the kinds of names this region seems to engender—Leap Lane, Starvation Creek, Seven Devils). North on Highway 3, past Joseph Canyon, where the Nez Perce Indians used to spend their winters—a breathtaking vista of great green folds of earth with the late-afternoon sun deepening every crevasse. Tradition has it that Chief Joseph was born and died here, despite his forced travels in between, and I can see why he fought so valiantly to stay. A left turn toward the setting sun, and all of the collected debris on my windshield is suddenly backlit and blinding me, so that the handful of turn-of-the-century buildings that constitute the tiny hamlet of Flora passes by me as if in a dream.

And then the peril begins.

I start down. And down. The road tightens; the pavement becomes gravel; the gravel becomes loose, and then looser. I can hear stones pelting the Aspect's wheel rims and an incessant crunching as if I am driving on broken glass. A sign warns, somewhat paradoxically, PRIMITIVE ROAD: NO WARNING SIGNS. Here and there, I spot a lonely black Angus chewing absentmindedly by the roadside. Or a tiny, decrepit shack leaning half-hidden in the trees, remnants of a land rush amid land better suited to black bears and bighorn sheep.

For a few miles, I hug a hillside, enjoying a glorious view of a fertile valley below—wide grassy meadows rippling in the wind. Then comes the real descent. The road turns to dirt and the switch-backs curl tightly, so much so that I soon lose count of the twists and turns. The rains have made the dirt soft in spots. I can feel the Aspect pleading for traction. I can smell the brakes. There is no shoulder, and the drop-off is at least a thousand feet. Were another vehicle to arrive, heading in the other direction…I shake

away the notion. Instead, I round a curve and come upon a herd of two dozen cows milling in the road. They stare at me with blank expressions, with no intention of moving. How did they get up here? I inch forward, and they scatter in slow motion. Returning to my white-knuckling, I spot a peregrine falcon hovering overhead, circling buzzard-like.

I suppose the situation is appropriate. Troy and death are forever linked, as the plains surrounding the legendary city are the setting for some of the most graphic and horrific descriptions of warfare in literary history. The violence in the *Iliad* is enough to make Mel Gibson blanch. Fifty-three Achaean soldiers and 199 Trojan warriors perish in Homer's epic, and the poet mentions most of the ill-fated by name and manner of death. They are killed by stomping horse hooves, by rocks to the head, by arrows through the jaw, by swords through the neck. Spears are thrust into hearts, and they quiver with the last heartbeat. Bowels gush. Brains scatter. Teeth spill out. Marrow spurts out of spines.

Homer is at his most skilled when describing some of the least desirable means of demise. Peneleos stabs Iloneus through the eye with a spear, slices his sword through the man's neck, and then lifts up the severed head "like a poppy head on a long stalk." Menelaus drives his sword into the forehead of Peisandros so that both of his eyes fall "bleeding in the dust at his feet." Soldiers topple "as a mountain-ash is felled on a far-seen summit" and lie "groaning and clutching at the blood-stained dust." Sometimes Homer extends similes for miles, as when Hector downs Patroclus "like a wild boar killed by a lion, when both are angry and both are parched with thirst, and they fight over a little mountain pool, until the lion is too strong for the panting boar."

Often, the poet transitions quickly from the brutality of war to the finality of its intentions, capping a bloody scene with words like "death surging in his eyes took him, hard destiny" or "life and spirit ebbed from the broken man." In the end, the *Iliad* emerges as a sort of existential tragedy in the sense that Achilles, who is at one point almost inhuman in his destruction and desecration, finally comes to realize that his own inevitable death is what binds him to the rest of humanity.

Which brings me back to me. For the past few days, I have been limping. I cannot for the life of me figure out how it happened, but somewhere along the line I injured my foot, so that if I step in the wrong manner I am rewarded with pain sharp enough to make me gasp and nearly

collapse. Later, I will receive a diagnosis: calcific tendonitis in the back of my left foot. In other words, remarkably enough, an inflamed Achilles heel.

Of course, I am already well aware of my mortality. I just didn't expect to confront it on the fringes of Troy. Just a few days into my journey, and already I am risking life and limb (all right, not limb—just a sore foot) in pursuit of…what? A better handle on life? If I die in the process, the irony would just kill me. So would Amy.

On the other hand, there are worse places to give up the ghost. This ranks among the most stunning scenery I have ever seen. In fact, there is a story, often told in this part of the country, of a man who dies and rises to heaven, where he is surprised to find a group of people under lock and chain.

"Who are they?" the man asks Saint Peter.

"Oregonians," is the reply, "and they want to go back."

Finally, after some sixteen miles and ninety minutes, my world is flat once more. I arrive at a paved bridge over the Grande Ronde River, Oregon's largest tributary to the Snake River, and a sign: TROY 2 MILES. Quails skitter across the road as I come upon a handful of cabins leading to a sort of compound with a main building that looks as though it was constructed from the pines around it. The marquee says, SHILO INN LODGE—CAFÉ—RV PARK—GAS. Isolation is the mother of diversification.

This remote piece of paradise is the end of the road (as Troy was, too, for Hector and Achilles and Patroclus and the rest, although certainly not Odysseus). I want this place to have profound origins, to have been named by an explorer with a poet's soul—a man who arrived here, where the Wenaha River feeds into the swiftly flowing Grande Ronde, and envisioned the Hellespont along the river Scamander; a man who saw the great hills rising on either side of this three-thousand-foot-deep canyon and recalled mighty-walled Troy; a man who glanced at the lush pine forests clinging to the sides of those hills and conjured up an image of arrows protruding from Achaean shields.

Alas, the place, originally settled by Mormons at the turn of the century, was most likely named for an early resident. His name was Troy Grinstead.

There are hamlets named Troy in another thirty states, from Maine to California, and most of them have equally pedestrian origins. The Troy in North Carolina was named after a state legislator; the Troy in West Virginia took the name of the city's first postmaster; the one in Montana was

actually named for a weight measurement—the troy-ounce—during the gold rush. Several of the Troys were named after the most famous Troy with which the settlers were familiar—that being, of course, Troy, New York.

Even when a Troy is named after the legendary city of King Priam, it still smacks of the unrefined American frontier. The story goes that a Greek railroad worker in Idaho offered a shot of whiskey to anyone who would vote for his choice. Troy received twenty-nine votes. Nine people still voted for Vollmer.

The lights are dim inside the lodge, and a woman saunters in from a back room to check me into the RV park. “Red” it says on her nametag, and in the faint light it looks as if the name might fit.

“Well, that was quite a harrowing drive.”

She looks up from her paperwork. “Did you come down from Flora?”

I nod, and she lets out a little chuckle. “It was pouring rain earlier today. If it had still been raining, that road woulda been really slick.” She offers a half-grin. “You got lucky.”

There are twenty spaces in the RV park; two of them are occupied. I choose lucky number 13 and park the Aspect with its rear bumper almost hovering over the Grande Ronde (French for “big roundabout”). From the window in the rear bedroom, it looks as if I am on a riverboat.

The sun has ducked behind the hills, and the sky has morphed from a robin’s-egg blue to an aluminum gray. Above me dozens of tiny swallows —almost Hitchcockian in number—are darting and dive-bombing and gliding in grand arcs. They seem to be moving in layers of concentric circles, some flying low and frenetically, others amazingly high and moving in tranquil sweeps of the sky. The birds are hovering, but this time I resist the temptation to think of buzzards. I made it to Troy.

A lonely campground in Troy, Oregon

Morning arrives to the sound of the Grande Ronde murmuring, and I opt for breakfast at the café, where I am greeted by a half-dozen antlered animals peering from their mountings on a wall, as well as the torso of a bear, teeth bared, claws sharp, ready to pounce. Such is the attraction for most of the visitors here—hunting for elk in the hills, fly-fishing for steelhead in the river.

Some locals, all in their seventies, invite me to sit with them at a small circular table in the center of the room. Sharon and Del are my neighbors at the RV park. They have a house about fifty miles south in the town of Joseph, but they spend most of their time in Troy, where Del pursues steelhead. Ginger and Harvey, dressed in complementary flannel, have a home on the mountain, having ranched in the area for many years. In all, the four of them have been married to their respective spouses a combined ninety-nine years.

“I remember my first impression of Troy,” recalls Harvey with a smile. “I said, ‘Wouldn’t you hate to live somewhere where you have to drive up and down like that?’” Harvey turns to Ginger. “Didn’t I say that?” He leans back in his chair. “We’ve lived here since 1987.”

I tell them my tale of that very drive, and they all react with groans and raised arms, as if to tell me I don't know the half of it. They recount how frightened travelers constantly have trouble getting in and out of Troy. There was that time a frozen food truck plummeted over the bank, and a fertilizer truck, too. And that day when the pickup went over the edge, but the horse trailer—with two horses inside—stayed on the road, saving the truck from falling…

The door opens, and in strolls a fellow with longish silver hair and a white goatee, looking a bit like a cross between Kenny Rogers and Kid Rock. He is a good twenty years younger than the rest of them, but he pulls up a chair and slips into the conversation without missing a beat. His name is Dean E. Dean.

"My parents thought I was going to be dean of a college or something," he says, winking. Having retired from the army after two years in Vietnam, one in Korea and a stint patrolling the Czech and German border, Dean is a hunter, fisherman, and occasional river rafting guide. "If I have to work, I work a little," he admits. "I've lived here seventeen years, and I'm going to die here."

Harvey perks up and, to general laughter, asks, "When do you want it?"

Which returns the conversation to the harrowing road into Troy. My breakfast mates start listing the fatalities—that Kessler kid, that couple a few years back, those two folks in the yellow pickup…

"And then there's that kid who put that old Pontiac into Horseshoe Bend," says Dean. "That car's still there!"

At this, I have to interject, only half joking, "Now I'm scared to leave."

"It's scarier than that staying here," says Dean, with another wink. His smile stops halfway, and he shrugs, taking the conversation to the other side of the world. "You never think it's gonna be you. We lost twenty-six men once from rocket attacks—from mortars. But it wasn't me."

Del gives a grunt of acknowledgment. He was a gunner's mate in the navy in Korea.

"So maybe," I offer, "the lesson is to make the journey slow and easy…"

Dean nods and clasps his hands behind his head. "Down here, anyone who's in a hurry is in the wrong place."

The banter bears that out, its pace slow and steady, meandering without real purpose, occasionally taking an unexpected turn—just a leisurely drive

down conversational switchbacks. There is no destination; the goal is simply to pass time and revel in commonalities.

Isn't that what my wife keeps telling me? She wants me to enjoy the moment. Take pleasure in life's journey. I always seem to be in such a rush to get to an amorphous Somewhere. Maybe that's why she was in such a hurry for me to leave for Anywhere. Good thing she told me to go to Ithaca before she was inspired to tell me to go to hell.

A stooped elderly man shuffles into the café behind a walker. "That's Bud. We call him the Mayor," Dean whispers. "He's ninety-five, never been married. He's pretty amazing. He's going in for his last chemo treatment for bladder cancer, and he just bought a computer so he can research volcanoes. The man loves volcanoes."

He calls out to the old man. "You still driving?"

"I been drivin' for eighty years without an accident. Couple o' fender benders, but those don't count," Bud declares. "My driver's license is good till I'm a hundred and two."

"How about Ol' Man Brown," says Sharon, eliciting some knee-slapping. She turns to me. "I'm telling ya, he doesn't drive more than five miles per hour. When he comes by here, you wonder how he keeps the motor running."

This sort of tittle-tattle appears to be a necessity for survival in Troy, fifty miles from the nearest grocery store, a place so remote that when the garbage truck makes the trek to town every Thursday, it is an occasion for the locals to dump their trash at the inn and stay for a game of cards. So gossip here is sustenance.

"This used to be called the Lesbi Inn," says Dean, stretching his arms toward the rafters. "It used to be run by two gals and a guy. He was gay and so were they."

"Remember when that he/she pulled into the RV park?" Sharon asks. "We spent days trying to figure it out. We kind of determined he/she was male. He was strange."

Here, our waitress, a curly-haired woman named Mary, who has been hovering around the edges of the conversation, hands me a muffin and interjects a recollection. "He had a set of legs I'd kill for, though. That was what pissed me off."

"It's interesting," I say, as the laughter subsides. "As isolated as this place is, as hard as it is to get to, as much as you may come here to get

away from it all, once you're here everybody knows everybody's business."

Everyone nods, and Dean speaks for the bunch. "We have a little saying here: You can't fart at one end of this canyon without someone knowing about it before you get to the other end."

I cross a footbridge over the Grande Ronde and make my way to a one-story building painted periwinkle. A red one would have more satisfied my expectations, because here is the proverbial one-room schoolhouse. I walk inside, where a woman named Marilyn is tidying up, and we chat for a while. It is a Sunday, but Marilyn picks up the phone to dial the teacher, who says she will be right over. She lives just down the road.

There are actually two rooms here, each connected to a narrow hallway in which the students' names are taped above their lockers—Jesse, Clint, Luis, Sophia, Karina, Emily, Big Salvador, Little Salvador. That is the entire population—kindergarten through eighth grade—of the Troy School.

One room is Troy's library, brimming with books. The garbage truck drivers, my breakfast companions had informed me, volunteer to transport boxes of books to the canyon on their regularly scheduled pickup days. Posted throughout are the fruits of the students' scientific labors—poster board summaries of experiments about exploding vinegar and a hypothesis that noncarbonated drinks freeze faster than carbonated drinks. Several dozen books sit on a cart, ready to be reshelved. I can't help but notice that one of them is a volume about mythology.

Through a doorway is the single classroom, anachronistically adorned with eleven computers—more than one per child. There are drawings on the walls to accompany haikus created by the students. A poster of the solar system implores them to "Reach for the stars!" Through the window, I can see a playground and a couple of basketball hoops, each set at a different height, and a couple of grazing cows.

"The good thing about this being a one-room schoolhouse," says the teacher when she arrives, "is everything is a science project. Everything is history. Everything is an event. If I cook something, I'll make everybody try it. I'm making sushi at home right now. Or we have killdeer eggs hatching out on the playground, so we're turning it into a hypothesis of the eggs—when they were laid, how many do they think will hatch, how many will survive…"

Like the computers in the classroom, Stephanie Haggard upends expectations, and not only because she is making sushi in rural Oregon. Only a few years older than I, broad shouldered, with her blond hair drawn tightly back from her face, she cuts an imposing figure. She is no matronly schoolmarm. Indeed, she tells me that she didn't set out to be a schoolteacher at all; back in Texas, she wanted a job with Border Patrol. But the children of Troy can thank whoever left some Betadine surgical scrub bottles on the steps of a medical clinic at Yellowstone National Park.

"I was working at Mammoth Clinic in Yellowstone, and I went downstairs to get some insurance papers. I stepped on a bottle, hyperextended, and fell down on concrete. I was in tremendous pain. I went to the Texas Back Institute in Plano, Texas," she says. "I had some surgery. I'm titanium from the bellybutton down."

Which, of course, makes her even *more* imposing—the bionic teacher, the Terminator educator.

"I got hired by Border Patrol, and I was hoping my back would be well enough for me to take the position. But the doctor said, 'You can either go in for the operation or take the position with Border Patrol. Not both. It's just going to get worse with Border Patrol.' And I wanted to go into the FBI. I had all these high hopes for a life of grand adventure." She lets out a barely audible sigh and shrugs. "So I figured I'd go to school in the meantime. I got my gifted and talented certification—differentiating the curriculum and customizing it to specific students. So actually, this fit in perfectly for what I was trained to do."

Stephanie's husband remains in Texas, where he coaches high school football. Her five-year-old daughter is finishing the school year with him there, while her eleven-year-old daughter is the "Sophia" I saw on one of the lockers. She and her husband aren't separated, Stephanie explains. "After being a coach's wife for thirteen years, I don't see him anyhow during the school year. So this is no big deal."

"So…is this an adventure?"

She grins. "Absolutely. The best. And it's good clean living. Sometimes it's surreal. I have to pinch myself. I don't hear ambulances. I don't hear cars going by. I open my window at night, and I hear the Wenaha River. I don't lock my door. I know everybody. I went to high school in California, and I swore I would never raise my children there. I love Texas and the

people, but I really wanted to get back to my roots. I lived in the town of Jardine, Montana, which is population twenty-four."

"Which makes Troy about twice as big."

She nods. "I'm used to this type of situation—a very rural community with a certain small-town etiquette where you have to both go with the flow and be your own person." She leans forward to make a point. "It took me one year to get my bearings, to knock down walls. But you know what? Parents today don't know who their children's friend's parents are. They don't know who their kids are playing with. I do. I know all the parents real well."

Stephanie points out the potential for boredom, but I can only envision the pressure. There is no comfort in the support system of fellow teachers and administrators, other than a teacher's aide who primarily focuses on the younger students. Stephanie's pupils range in age from near-toddlers to near-teens, so she doesn't have the luxury of focusing her attentions on one subject or age-group curriculum. She happens to be fluent in Spanish, which must be a godsend to the families of her four Hispanic students. So it is essentially a bilingual, multilevel classroom with nowhere to hide any missteps or conflicts. I imagine it is like trying to play eight instruments at once.

From Troy, the students will go on to normal schooling, if it can be considered normal to take a two-hour commute to high school or to board with a family that houses students from rural areas for four hundred dollars a month. Meanwhile, in only her second year of her first teaching job, Stephanie claims to have learned how to make this system work: Explain the why of things, not just the what. Carve out a routine, especially at the beginning of the year, but be flexible. Let the children help. Allow the more athletic ones to lead a PE class. Let a creative student lead an art class. Take advantage of the maturity of the oldest kids, as most one-room schoolhouses do, but don't go overboard—they have their own learning to do, too.

Stephanie Haggard and the school in Troy

"You can get a good education from one room," she says. "For these kids, my goal for them is to graduate, to be productive citizens. That's why I got into teaching—because I got tired of the way schools were going. It honestly depends on the district policy. Who's making the red tape to cut through? See, they're teaching to a test now. Real learning is not taking place. They're cramming the children for finals. It's starting in kindergarten, and it's making me sick. Children are graduating and passing a test, and they can't diagram a sentence. America is raising idiots!"

She laughs, and then seems to think she should tone down the rhetoric. "That's what I see, and it scares me. That's why I said I would only work for a certain type of school that will allow the children to be creative and grow as much as they need and help where they need it. Our kids will take a test, and they'll pass it. But if you're doing real teaching, learning will take place."

I notice that Stephanie refers to them as her children, rather than her students, and it isn't necessarily just a semantic distinction. She takes them camping and kayaking. She drives all eight kids to Idaho for a week of skiing and to the central Oregon coast for a tour of an aquarium and a lighthouse. The students don't bring an apple for the teacher; they bring a bag of apples because they know she'll bake a couple of apple pies—one

for her, one for them. Maybe they'll enjoy a bite or two while they're playing at her house.

"At home, I'm still Mrs. H. I'm not Stephanie. The respect is still there," she says, "but I'll be down on the floor playing games with them."

It is at this point that I hear various voices in my head, my own personal Greek chorus. I suppose I should explain:

A few days earlier, on my way out of Seattle, I drove south for an hour to the state capital, Olympia, and an appointment at the Mud Bay Coffee Company. On the second Wednesday of every month, a group of Olympians gather there to sip exotic coffees and teas and ponder mankind's most vexing questions. They call it a Philosopher Café, and it is one of many such open forums for inquiry that have sprouted up around the country—actually, around the world—in the past decade. People meet in bookstores, libraries, community centers, even homeless shelters and airport terminals. They aim for intellectual honesty by participating in critical questioning, as Socrates famously did. They ask questions like: What is patriotism? When is violence necessary? Is human nature constant throughout history? What's wrong with cloning? They talk with each other, not at each other. It is a philosophical jam session—conceptual jazz.

Having discovered Olympia's version, I asked a favor of the participants. Would they be willing to consider the question that propels me toward Ithaca: What, exactly, is a hero? In contemporary America, what is a heroic life?

We gathered at the coffeehouse in a small conference room, its walls the color of hemlock. Most of the Mud Bay Philosophers were in their late twenties or early thirties, but they were an ethnically diverse bunch—John, who has a job at a blood center as he prepares to return to school in pursuit of his masters in philosophy; Kristy, his girlfriend, who works at a day-care center for elderly people with Alzheimer's and dementia; Pasha, an Iranian-American computer systems administrator; Rebekah, a first-grade teacher of Swedish descent; Maki and Keiko, fourth- and fifth-grade teachers who emigrated from Japan; and Ben and Roz, a retired engineer and his wife.

My initial questions begat many more: What is the purpose of the hero? Is it something we strive for? Is it a standard we can't possibly reach? It is an overused term? Is it about physical courage or moral courage? Can a

hero still be morally flawed? Can there be a heroic act without heroic motivations? What if you have heroic motivations, but fail terribly? Does it taint the effort to call attention to your own heroic act? Is the hero defined by the actor or by the perceiver? Is each of us the author of our own criteria? Is there such a thing as a universal hero?

Of course, the questions were easier than the answers. Trying to zero in on an absolute definition of heroic achievement is like trying to find your way to the exit of an unworkable maze. Every supposition leads to more possibilities, so the task becomes exponentially more difficult, and you wind up somewhere near to where you began. Still, for a couple of hours I reveled in the nobility of the attempt.

In discussing the spectrum of the heroic with my Greek chorus in Olympia, we worked our way to the subject of heroic professions. One of the group asked, “What about those people who aren’t necessarily at risk of death, but they’re constantly, on a daily basis, working toward something greater than themselves? I think when you choose to do something like that, it can be a heroic choice—those things that kind of grind you down, take you piece by piece, that person who gives his or her life away bit by bit until there’s nothing left. Isn’t that a hero?”

We were talking, in particular, about teachers, and one of the teachers in the group gave a terse reply: “I think we gain more than we give.”

Stephanie’s dedication to the job in Troy is inspiring to me, and not just on an educational level. It instills much the same warm feeling I get on those rare occasions when I encounter a doctor who takes phone calls at home or a contractor who puts in overtime but doesn’t charge for it. For some people, a job is merely a means to an end; for others, it is a means of achieving self-actualization. Call it what you want—conscientiousness, commitment, dependability. But I am convinced there is a heroic quality to not just doing something but doing it to the best of your ability. Individually, it is an affirmation of spirit. Collectively, it furthers humanity. Karma, and all that. It is a driving philosophy of mine, but one to which, I must admit, I don’t always adhere.

The students of Troy put on a play last Christmas—*The Legend of the Poinsettia*. It is the story of a poor Mexican girl who had no gift to present the Christ Child at Christmas Eve services. But her cousin tells her that surely even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes. So as she walks toward the chapel, she kneels by the roadside and

gathers a handful of common weeds, fashioning them into a tiny bouquet. As she lays the bouquet at the foot of the nativity scene, the weeds suddenly burst into blooms of brilliant red—a Christmas miracle.

I wonder if the actors in the drama—or even their teacher—fully appreciated how the story applies to them.

After returning along the footbridge, I stop by the lodge and notice a flyer on a bulletin board: WANTED: DEAD, NOT ALIVE…JOIN THE INVASIVE WEED PATROL. It implores folks to get rid of a particular weed that crowds out native plant species. Its name is the medusahead. More irony.

Moments later, I am confronted with an equally impressive coincidence when I stop and chat with another local couple, who overheard me explaining the premise of my journey over breakfast. The man, a fellow named Ralph, informs me that his father was a native of the Aeolian Islands, off the north coast of Sicily. The islands were colonized by the Greeks about two hundred years after Homer's day and named after the mythical figure Aeolus, who kept the winds bottled up in a cave on an island and released them at the bidding of the gods.

When Odysseus happens by on his long trip home, Aeolus offers him hospitality for a month and then a farewell gift consisting of the blustering breezes tied up securely in a leather bag. But he leaves the west wind free to blow, so that it may carry Odysseus's ships home. And home the weary travelers go, actually to within sight of Ithaka, only to be undone by their own covetousness. Odysseus falls asleep, and his men get to talking. Suspecting that the leather bag must contain a gift of treasures, they open it. Immediately, the winds rush out, driving the ships all the way back to the isle of Aeolus.

Astonished at their return, Aeolus is in an unforgiving mood. "Get off this island at once, you miserable sinner!" he shouts at Odysseus. "It is not permitted to comfort the enemy of the blessed gods!" Odysseus and his crew are to sail on, disheartened, with no wind to help them now.

If the scene is to be taken as a sort of fable within a legend, the moral might be that while no man can control the winds, we are the authors of our own decisions. Our choices point us in one direction or another, for better or worse. And, to echo Robert Frost, that can make all the difference.

At some point, Ralph's father decided it was time to set off from a Mediterranean isle toward a new world. Sometime, perhaps during a mortar attack in Southeast Asia, Dean E. Dean came to some conclusions about where he wanted to spend the remainder of his days. Somewhere along the line, maybe even at the bottom of a stairway in Yellowstone, Stephanie came to realize that she had it in her to climb higher. They opted for the road less traveled—a life-changing decision for all. And is there not a heroic element to seeing it through?

Odysseus had no desire to leave his wife and family for war, but he remained true to his word, fought valiantly, even conjured up the idea for the Trojan horse. Then he wanted nothing more than to leave Troy and go home.

The folks in Troy, Oregon? They seem to want nothing more than to stay. THANKS FOR VISITING TROY, says the sign, as I set off on the next leg of my journey. Y'ALL COME BACK AND VISIT US SOON. DRIVE CAREFULLY.

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